

‘Rogues of the Racecourse’: Racing Men and the Press in Inter-War Britain

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In 1931 former Chief Constable and Detective, Fred Wensley reflected in his autobiography, *Forty Years of Scotland Yard*, “Any reader of the daily papers these days might come to the conclusion that Chicago is the only place in which organized bands of desperate criminals ever existed. The public have a short memory”.¹ As Wensley implied, prior to the arrival of the gangster on British shores, concerns about organised crime were already prevalent in the early 1920s. In this period anxieties about criminal gangs in London, Sheffield and Glasgow were reflected in the growing newspaper coverage of the apparent eruption of racketeering, protection and gambling-related crime, frequently involving the use of razors or other potentially lethal weapons. Most prominent was the reporting of the activities of the racecourse gangs, often collectively referred to as the “racecourse wars”, during the 1920s and briefly in the 1930s. The gangs were broadly constituted by men involved in the running of protection rackets and territorial disputes relating to the dominance of particular racecourses. There were also a range of peripheral illegalities relating to intimidation, blackmail, and offences involving firearms and interpersonal violence, such as wounding and attempted murder.² Despite the wide press reportage of such events, the terminology of organised crime has been seen as largely irrelevant in the context of early twentieth-century Britain. For instance, the criminologists Dick Hobbs and Alan Wright have characterised early gang conflicts as local, territorial and lacking in cohesion. The London gangs of this period are essentially understood as loose alliances engaged in violent confrontations over territory and what

Hobbs has called, “neighbourhood orientated extortion”.³ On the other hand, Philip Jenkins and Gary W. Potter have argued that there *are* continuities between the inter-war gambling underworld and the syndicated organised crime that developed in Britain after the Second World War. They note that contemporaries (journalists and police) did make connections between “domestic racetrack gangs...and transatlantic gangsters”.⁴

A key focus of this article is the development of new forms of language used to describe serious criminality in the contemporary press. It draws on a range of newspapers in a period that has been characterised as one of significant change in the presentation and layout, circulation and popularisation of the press.⁵ Whilst crime reporting was a perennial feature of local and national press, from the inter-war period the competition for readership fuelled the increasing tabloidisation of content, which was particularly reflected in the growing popularity of the Sunday press. As Adrian Bingham has noted, in this period the reading public not only grew in size but also, “the practice of reading daily newspapers extended beyond the lower middle-classes and became a normal feature of working-class life”.⁶ Moreover, as Lucy Bland has argued, “By the 1920s, the popular ‘dailies’ had adopted the late Victorian ‘new journalism’ of sex, crime and scandal, initially the preserve of the Sunday papers”.⁷ The press surveyed here includes elite papers such as *The Times* and the *Daily Telegraph* as well as the “Northcliffe” papers (which after his death in 1922 were owned by Lord Rothermere), which included *The Times* but also the *Daily Mail*, and the *Daily Mirror*. According to Williams the twenties were a period of some decline for the *Mirror*, leading to its re-launch in 1935 as a mass-market tabloid.⁸ However, the *Mirror*, along with the Sunday’s such as the *News of the World*, would capitalise on the racecourse wars, publishing photographs of tough-looking

racing-men and tending towards boldly sensational headlines (*News of the World*, August 6, November 15 and 26, 1922; *Daily Mirror*, November 21, 1922, February 13 and 26, 1923). In the early 1920s such papers filled their pages with strong visual images, appealing to the working and lower-middle class readership.⁹ Nevertheless, whilst the papers used here did vary in their readership and in style and intention, there were some common features to the content. Journalism across the press drew on the stereotype of the “alien” criminal that was already entrenched by this time. Bingham has argued that, “By repeatedly emphasising the responsibility of foreigners for much of the ‘vice’ in Britain, journalists suggested that a fundamentally moral nation was being corrupted by unwanted influences from abroad”.¹⁰ In the context of the racecourse-wars, it would seem that editorial policy favoured similar connections between “gang” crime and foreign criminality. In the tabloid press the language of organised crime would increasingly show the influence of wider reporting practices. John Carter Wood has looked at the ways in which the terminology used to describe police interrogation practices in American press reporting was “imported” in the later 1920s.¹¹ Similarly, whilst the “gang” was already a familiar construct in the British press, the imported “gangster” would gradually eclipse the “alien criminal” in this period. In terms of news values, the presence of “alien” criminals, gangsters and violence could be said to have guaranteed the extensive coverage of the “racecourse-wars”. Yvonne Jewkes’ survey of news value such as risk, celebrity, violence and conflict, and spectacle are thus reflected here. Different papers emphasised different values more or less.¹² Thus papers like the *Empire News* and the *News of the World* focussed on celebrity and spectacle rather more than the more respectable papers like *The Times* and *Telegraph*, where the emphasis was on the more mainstream news

values of violence and conflict. Most of the papers, even those which were not London-based, reflected concerns about proximity.¹³ As this essay will demonstrate, the racing-men did not limit their activities to the racecourses, but frequently enacted their conflicts in environments (city streets, train stations, bars and nightclubs) that were spatially and geographically proximate for papers readership.

The following article will explore the shifting cultural contexts in which the press constructed outbreaks of metropolitan gang-related crime. The main part of the essay will concentrate on the extended coverage of what became known as the “racecourse wars”, by considering four key themes which shape the accounts of racecourse crime in the period between 1920 and 1925: the organisation of crime; alien criminality; the use of firearms and the mobility of criminals. After 1925, despite continuing outbreaks of violence and racecourse related crime, the press coverage subsided. However, in 1936 the racing-men once again became “folk devils”, and the final part of the article will explore the re-emergence of press reportage of racecourse violence in a decade during which American gangsterism would come to provide a template by which to re-interpret home-grown gang violence.¹⁴

The organised criminal

Ideas about criminal organisation were not simply a product of the inter-war period, and prior to the emergence of the “gangster”, concerns about professional and organised forms of criminality had been voiced in the national press. Clive Emsley has noted that the term “organised crime” was not one much used in the first two-thirds of the twentieth century.¹⁵ Certainly for much of the late Victorian and Edwardian eras, specific references to organised crime and criminality were used predominately in a political

context, most commonly in relation to events in Ireland, although occasional references to organised crime groups in Naples and Paris can be found (*The Times*, October 22, 1880, January 10, 1881, May 21 1920; *Observer*, February 10, 1907; *Manchester Guardian*, July 12, 1911). However, from the early twentieth century, references to British organised and professional crime would become more common, and by the inter-war years new paradigms of professional criminality were evolving in public and print discourses. Thus, as Alyson Brown has recently noted in reference to the 1920s, “the ‘motor-bandit’ and ‘smash-and-grab raiders, were often depicted as new and ‘modern’; more ruthless and calculating, more inured in crime than their predecessors and more exciting”.¹⁶ Partly, as Emsley has suggested, this focus on “new” forms of criminality may be to do with the emergence of the written commentary of policemen, particularly the detectives of the CID and the Flying Squad such as Fred Wensley and Frederick “Nutty” Sharpe.¹⁷ In such writings, “new” methods and forms of criminality were strongly associated with the organisation and planning of crime. Thus in 1933, ex-Divisional Detective Charles Leach would describe the “new criminal” of the post-war period: “brought up on the ‘movies’ and the ‘dogs,’ and restlessly moving towards the dogs; daily swelling the growing army of the new-style criminal, the ‘smash-and-grab’ artists, the ‘cat-burglars’, the motor-bandits, the confidence-tricksters, the Legion of the Lost who bend to their nefarious uses the latest attainments of Science as fast as the picked brains of the country evolve them...”.¹⁸ Victorian concepts of professional criminality would be re-cast for a modern post-war era. By the early 1920s, British newspapers would increasingly refer to the issue of home-grown organised gangs. Initially, this had been linked to the impact of the war. According to *The Times*, for

example, “Service in the Army has taught these men the value of organization” (January 22, 1920). However, elsewhere in the paper references to organised property crime were starting to be used in relation to crime organised on a gang-basis. For example, in February 1920, *The Times* described a gang of warehouse-breakers as “Highly-Organized Criminals”; their “up-to-date methods” described by Superintendent Wensley of Scotland Yard (February 14, 1920). Whilst it is not entirely clear what constituted “up-to-date methods”, the use of a motor-car, a level of planning and a willingness to use force were indicative. These characteristics had also been stated in an earlier article entitled, “Up-To-Date Criminals”: planning and specialisation were seen as key, as was the “motor-car as part of their equipment” (*The Times*, January 21, 1920).¹⁹

Perhaps it is unsurprising that the outbreaks of racecourse related crime from 1920 would be cloaked in this new language of criminal organisation. Their mobility seemed to suggest an economic organisation, planning and co-ordination that cast their net beyond the boundaries of more traditional hooligan fracas. In July 1920, one of the earliest reports on the racecourse conflicts in *The Times* called for the Jockey Club to suppress the activities of “the organized and capitalized bands of rogues and ruffians”. The next spring, after violence had erupted at a race meeting at Alexandra Park, a *Times* editorial would again draw attention to the problem of the racecourse ruffians, “who undoubtedly work in organized gangs and are undoubtedly capitalized” (July 17, 1920). By the summer of 1922, in response to outbreaks of racecourse related crime, the press perpetuated the new stereotype of a more violent, more organised, more resourced, and more mobile criminal. Simple if effective descriptions of “ruffianism” and “rowdyism”, were frequently shadowed by a more sinister language which drew on the worrying idea

of the “enemy within”. References to terrorism, insurrection, vendettas, and espionage can be found in press coverage on the racecourse wars throughout the early twenties, the reportage shaped by underlying assumptions about foreigners, violence and crime.²⁰ For example, the *Evening Standard* would describe the conflict between the police and the race-gangs in martial terms, reporting that “The Criminal Investigation Department at Scotland Yard is making war on the racecourse terrorists... These desperados are the agents of a highly organised and dangerous gang, whose activities recently have been of a violent character” (August 24, 1922). In a report the following day, the *Standard* again drew on the rhetoric of organisation and insurgency, describing “a dangerous London blackmailing organisation”, claiming that the “enemy” had employed their own “secret service” by which to monitor the activities of the police (*Evening Standard*, August 25, 1922).

The alien criminal

The evoking of terror and the use of martial language, the suggestion of an external threat, was accompanied by the common observation that the racecourse gangs were composed of foreign criminals. As Joanna Bourke has shown, aliens threatened notions of “Britishness” and of the cohesion of the nation in the post-war period.²¹ Consequently perceptions of criminality were deeply associated with the fear of “otherness”. The male, alien, criminal – Chinese, Asian, Italian, Black – became an urban stereotype, often portrayed as caricatures of manhood. Indeed, the Blackwell Committee of 1918 had made specific associations between firearms and aliens, and had recommended that the Alien’s Act be extended to allow the police special powers to search suspected aliens for firearms. Arguably, the subsequent Firearms Act of 1920 had been driven by fears about

armed insurrection, in particular Bolshevism, Anarchism, and Fenianism.²² Whilst concerns about alien criminality were hardly new, a key trope would link political insurgency, foreign criminals and organised crime in a way that would provide the press with an easy shorthand when “Italians and Foreign Jews” were identified amongst the racecourse men. Two reports from correspondents in *The Times*, in the spring and summer of 1921, would specifically highlight the apparent foreignness of the racing men. Thus in April, the racing correspondent commented on the London gang, “most of whom apparently are Italians” and the Birmingham gang, “mostly foreign Jews” (*The Times*, April 4, 1921). Calling for a permanent racecourse police to be established, he noted, “much more can be done to keep these wretched foreigners in subjection”. It was possibly the same correspondent writing about “Roughs at the Races”, in a July edition of the paper, re-iterating the alienism of the protagonists, “These gangs are nothing but the scum of the earth. They are not in the most instances Englishmen. They are almost invariably foreign Jews” (*The Times*, July 26, 1921). However, the press exploitation of the alien criminal stereotype did have its limitations when clearly the majority of the racing men were London born, including the notorious Sabini gang. The Sabini brothers were of Anglo-Italian descent and part of the Italian community in Clerkenwell since at least the 1890s. In 1940, when Charles “Darby” Sabini was interned as an “enemy alien”, he constantly reiterated his Englishness and sought to distance himself from the Anglo-Italian community.²³

Nevertheless, the exotic elements of the apparent “Italian” involvement in the racecourse wars during the early 1920s were exploited both by the press and the judicial authorities. In 1922 the *Empire News* had explicitly linked the Sabini gang to their Italian

Mafia compatriots, describing the gang conflicts as “guerilla warfare” and “resembling the methods of the Mafia gangs of Italy and America” (August 6, 1922). In September 1922, the paper contained what purported to be an interview with “Darby” Sabini, described as the “Chief of the Sabini Gang”, who used the opportunity to distance himself and his brothers from accusations of organised crime, “We are not an organised gang and never have been” (*Empire News*, September 3, 1922).²⁴ Foreshadowing the descriptions of major figures in the American underworld which later became common in the British press of the late 1920s and early thirties, reports in the *Empire News* would describe “Darby” as “A dapper, sturdy-looking little man with the quick, flashing eyes of his race”; noting in a later account that, “He is of rather striking appearance, broad-shouldered, with clearly defined, regular features, a clean-shaven face, and neatly brushed hair” (September 3 and December 3, 1922). Some of the most dramatic stereotypes would accompany the reporting of the shooting of Harry Sabini in the Fratellanza club in Clerkenwell in November 1922. At the January trial of the accused Cortesi brothers (described in the *Daily Express* as “swarthy men”) presiding Justice Darling placed the events firmly in the historical context of Italian faction fighting (November 22, 1922; *The Times*, January 19, 1923). When Enrico and Gus Cortesi were found guilty for the attempted murders of Harry and Darby Sabini, the Grand Jury had recommended their deportation. In passing sentence Justice Darling had stated, “Let this be a warning to the whole of the Italian colony. They have heard the Grand Jury’s recommendation, and, although I am not this time acting upon it, it shows the temper of the country” (*Empire News*, January 21, 1923). Clearly, for the jingoistic *Empire News*, warring organised gangs of Italians and Jews provided lucrative copy. In an article published in the summer

of 1922, under a series of bizarre headlines—including the notable “Women Armed With Choppers”—the paper had informed its readers, “There is a battle being waged in the underworld of London between gangs of well-organised, well-armed men, who fight with the fury of uncivilised savages”. The violence that constituted what it called, “this weird warfare”, was conducted with hammers, choppers, razors and revolvers (*Empire News*, August 20, 1922). As Clive Emsley points out, “Extreme violence and the use of firearms were popularly considered to be un-English”.²⁵

The armed criminal

Whilst it was the razor with which the racecourse gangs would become most synonymous, in the early 1920s it seems to have been the advent of gun-crime that suggested escalation in the level and seriousness of the criminality involved in the racecourse wars.²⁶ In fact, across the reporting of the main events of 1921 and 1922, an array of weaponry, including knives, hammers, knuckle-dusters and the proverbial razor, were described. However, in terms of the most dramatic and sensationalist press reporting, the use of guns and pistols seemed to dominate the narrative. There is some sense that the war had unleashed not only the circulation of illegal arms but also the war-hardened armed criminal. A *Times* article of August 1922 connected the rise of armed criminals specifically with the events of that summer. Referring to the “echoes of revolver shots”, which had been heard in Hornsey, Lewisham, Kensington, Camden-Town, Gray’s Inn Road and Belgravia, the reporting reflected broader concerns about the racecourse wars (*The Times*, August 25, 1922). Events would peak in the summer and autumn of 1922, when three major incidents involving racing-men and revolvers would lead to extensive and sensational press reporting of the “racecourse feuds” or vendettas

(*Empire News*, September 3, 1922; *News of the World*, September 17, 1922; *Daily Telegraph*, August 21, 1922; *The Times*, November 4, 1922; *Daily Mirror*, October 27, 1922). The first incident was the attempted shooting of a detective named John Rutherford on the Gray's Inn Road on the evening of 28 July; the second was the Camden Town shooting on the night of 19 August, when two gangs of racing-men came into armed conflict; the third was the attempted murder of Charles (alias Darby) and Harry Sabini in the Fratellanza Club in Clerkenwell, on 19 November (*The Times*, August 8, 1922).²⁷ This series of events would lead to dramatic headlines and reports which painted a frightening picture of gun crime on the streets of the metropolis: "At Revolver's Point", "Revolver at Head", "In Face of a Revolver", "Shooting Sensation", "Runaway Gunman Downed and Disarmed" (*Empire News*, August 27 and November 26, 1922; *News of the World*, August 6 and 13, 1922). A number of reports focussed on the revolver-stiletto recovered from the scene of the scene of the Camden Town shooting; the *Daily Mirror* described, "A weapon which was half six-chambered revolver and half stiletto and could be hidden in a walking stick" (August 31, 1922). It could be argued that the press focus on the use of firearms reflected a number of culturally reinforced anxieties of the aftermath. The metaphors of conflict, war and battle, as I have argued elsewhere, can be understood as examples of the residual martial rhetoric that was a cultural legacy of the recent war.²⁸ Moreover, the reference to the feud and vendetta in relation to the gun battles described here draws directly on myths and histories of the Sicilian and Napalese "blood feuds", again evoking the trope of the "foreign criminal" and as seen earlier, explicitly stated in Justice Darling's summing-up at the Old Bailey.²⁹ Elsewhere, popular culture would provide the rhetoric of the "wild west" to describe the running gun

battles on the streets of the metropolis. For example, the *News of the World* mixed metaphors in the headline: “Racecourse Feud – Wild West Scenes in the Streets of London” (August 27, 1922; *Daily Express*, December 3, 1923). Indeed, in scenes reminiscent of the bar-room brawls depicted in the hugely popular silent westerns of the period, the press would go to town on the events of late November 1922, when Louisa Doralli, daughter of the secretary of the Fratellanza Club, threw herself bodily in front of Harry Sabini. The *Empire News*, for example, described the scene with gusto: “Without a second’s hesitation she flung herself between the two men, and stood there for a second panting. Then Harry Sabini thrust her aside just as a shot rang out, followed quickly by another. As the reports echoed into silence Sabini gasped: “They have hit me!” and collapsed on the floor, clutching at his stomach” (*Empire News*, November 26, 1922).

By the mid-twenties with the outbreak of renewed racecourse gang violence the razor and the knife were portrayed very much as the racing-man’s weapon of choice, with the focus of press reporting on incidents of “razor-slashing”. In 1925, a *Daily Express* headline reported “Fifty Men Fight With Razors” in an apparent dispute about Lewes races (August 21, 1925).³⁰ The *Daily Mail* referred to “razor slashes on the face” as the mark of gangland vengeance (August 26, 1925). Whilst the Metropolitan Police dismissed much of the reported razor-fighting as press exaggeration, the cultural contexts that shaped press rhetoric in this period seem to have shifted, and it may have been the recent events in Sheffield that provided journalists with a language in which to report the apparent resurgence of racecourse gang violence in the summer of 1925.³¹ The violent confrontations of the Sheffield gangs over the control of the city’s tossing rings, in which the razor and the knife were the predominant tools, had escalated in 1924 and 1925.

Certainly, the Sheffield press would make connections between the Sheffield and London gangs, and there had been suggestions in 1923 that Sheffield gangs were travelling to London to “secure the services of a gang whose name is known nationally”.³² Whilst these rumours apparently amounted to nothing, they did reflect the belief in the increasing ability of criminals to move around the country, make connections and effectively organise. According to the *Sheffield Mail* story, the London gang (clearly the Sabinis) would travel up to the northern meetings to “afford their support”.³³ At the root of this was the concern about mobility. Unlike the accounts of Sheffield and Glasgow where, for the most part, gang conflicts were described within the geographical confinement of their local territory, the racecourse gangs transcended the limits of the city.

The mobile criminal

As Alyson Brown has noted, the ability of the criminal to take advantage of the motor-car was a growing concern for contemporaries, reflecting “wider concerns about the ‘modern’ age”.³⁴ The geographical spread of the racecourses meant that the racing-men were a mobile criminal threat transporting their territorial conflicts not only to the south-eastern meetings of Goodwood, Epsom, Lewes and Brighton, but further afield to Doncaster, Bath and York. Whilst special train excursions to race meetings had long been a feature of sporting life, from the post-war period there would be an increase in petrol-driven traffic at race meetings.³⁵ The problem of motorised criminality had been exercising contemporaries since before the war, when the term “motor bandits” had been coined to describe this new phenomenon (*The Times*, May 2, 1913, July 6, 1914 and May 1, 1920). However, from the perspective of post-war commentators such increases in the

means of getting to the races was specifically a boon to racecourse crime. Thus for the press in the early 1920s the mobility of the racing-men was a clear indication of criminal organisation, and the advent of the motor-car was perceived as critical to the racecourse thieves' modus operandi. Moreover, the "organized" and "capitalized" character of gangs meant that they could afford to be mobile: as noted in a *Times* editorial, "How otherwise can they afford to travel in luxurious motor-cars to meetings as far away from London as Newmarket, Gatwick and Lingfield?" (July 17, 1920). The perception then was that train-travel combined with motorised vehicles was encouraging a new form of organised racecourse crime. By 1921, these concerns were further acknowledged in *The Times*, with calls for the implementation of "a strong body of travelling racecourse police" (April 4, 1921). There was a sense that the police had lost control of the racing men, as the previous editorial had noted: "Before the war the majority of these rogues were known by the police and were generally kept away from many meetings. They were not allowed on to race trains if they were known" (*The Times*, July 17, 1920). Part of the challenge faced by the police was that criminal activity was no longer something that could be contained on the racecourses, and concerns were not simply voiced about the enhanced ability to travel to the races to commit crime. Press reports frequently described the skirmishes on the way to and from the races and outside the race enclosures. Thus fights broke out outside the Bath races in August 1921, when "gangs of roughs from Birmingham" attacked bookmakers and their clerks. Motor-cars were stopped and pedestrians assaulted, although given the fact that Sabini associate, Alfred Solomon of Long-acre, London, was amongst the pedestrians, suggests that this incident was one of a series in the ongoing "battle" for control of territory between Birmingham and London bookmakers and their

confederates (*The Times*, August 18, 1921). In an event that became ubiquitously reported as “The Battle of Epsom”, the Birmingham gang had attacked a group of Leeds bookmakers travelling in a converted Crossley Tender on their way back from the Epsom races, having apparently mistaken them for London men (*Epsom Herald*, June 10 and 17, July 1, 1921; *Surrey Advertiser and County Times*, July 23, 1921; *Sunday Express*, July 24, 1921).³⁶ Moreover, the spilling over of violence onto the transport infrastructure of the metropolis was also widely reported. In 1922 racing-men were described as rioting on tramcars, dashing from taxi-cabs and shooting outside Mornington Crescent tube station. In Camden reports noted the sudden arrival of three taxi-cabs, which preceded to discharge a cargo of twelve armed men (*Evening Standard*, August 30, 1922; *Daily Mirror*, August 31 and October 1, 1922; *Daily Telegraph*, August 31, 1922). On 24 August 1922, two gangs of racecourse thieves came to blows at Paddington Station, “They were preparing to travel to the Bath races by the same train, and just before the train was due to start the leaders of the gangs came into collision”, and “the drawing of a revolver” was reported (*The Times*, August 25, 1922). Reports told how Harry Sabini presented an automatic pistol at Fred Gilbert telling him, “I will blow your brains out” (*Evening Standard*, September 6, 1922; *The Times*, September 7, 1922; *News of the World*, September 10, 1922). According to further reports in the *Evening Standard* and *Daily Mirror* special precautions had been adopted, with Scotland Yard detectives deployed to stations running race-trains. The *Standard* (August 24, 1922) described how police had foiled the “Paddington Station Coup” with a vigorous campaign to round up the “armed desperados”, the *News of the World* (August 27, 1922) reported the “alleged hold-up of the Bath race train” and the *Mirror* (August 27, 1922) noted the protests of

disgruntled season-ticket holders, who apparently called for a tax on race-goers.

Underpinning this reporting was the threat represented by the increased ability of such criminals to move both around and beyond the metropolis. As an *Empire News* headline noted in a veiled reference to the Sabini gang, “Leader of the S- Gang. Travels Round London in His Small Motor-Car” (August 6, 1922).³⁷ By 1925, the racing-men had followed Darby Sabini’s lead and given up on public transport. In May sensational press headlines recounted a police chase of ten armed men in a large blue motor-car. Headlines screamed, “GUNMEN IN A MOTOR-CAR”, “POLICE LOSE TRAIL OF BIG BLUE MOTOR”, “GUNMEN’S WILD RIDE” (*Daily Mail*, May 22, 1925; *Daily Chronicle*, May 22, 1925; *Evening News*, May 22, 1925). The *Evening News* gave the most detailed account, describing how the car in question, a Landaulette, was actually a taxi-cab which, ordered from Powell’s Garage in Leytonstone, had proceeded on a wild ride to Epping Forest, to the Elephant and Castle, to Aldgate, to Maiden Lane and to the West End picking up various gang members (May 22, 1925). By this point, the driver had managed to attract the attention of the police who reported “that shots had been fired from a car as it sped at a terrific pace through the junction of that thoroughfare with Edgeware-road” (*Daily Mail*, May 22, 1925).³⁸ The almost filmic quality of these press reports, with their emphasis on action, movement and speed, is striking in an era before gangsters and getaway cars were to be regularly depicted on screen.

The “gangster”

Reporting of American gang conflicts, in Chicago but also in New York and Detroit, had featured in the British press throughout the decade. On the face of it, there seemed little comparison with the forms of gang warfare that seemed to be endemic in the great cities

of North America. For example, in Sheffield, despite the arrival of the gang-busting Chief Constable Percy Sillitoe in 1926, the *Mail* cautioned against excessive over-deployment of what it called, the “Chicago complex”: “Sheffield is not Chicago. Human life and limb are not exposed to American crime risks or a percentage of those risks. Way back in Michigan our Sheffield gang affrays would seem small affairs to the gunmen and machine-gun bandits”.³⁹ However, by the late 1920s, the popular British press would be increasingly influenced by broader cultural scripts. Comparisons with Chicago would become more newsworthy from the 1930s when a series of events including the St Valentine’s Day Massacre of 1929 and the increasing predominance and notoriety of Al Capone combined with the emergence of what Mark Roodhouse has recently called, “Gangster Chic” in popular culture.⁴⁰ However, it would not be the racecourse wars that drew the most explicit parallels with North American gang crime. As Andrew Davies has demonstrated, it was Glasgow that became the new “Chicago” by the early 1930s.⁴¹ The “racecourse wars” were largely consigned to the past as a colourful feature of the “roaring twenties” and after the mid-twenties, coverage of the racecourse wars was much more sporadic. The newspaper reportage of the gangs in the latter part of the decade was far from the sensational coverage of the key events of the early twenties. By the later 1920s Darby Sabini had relocated to Hove, near Brighton. This may have resulted from his involvement in a libel action against the D. C. Thomson and Co. paper, the *Topical Times* in 1925 after a series of unfavourable articles connected the Sabini brothers to race-gang violence. Why Sabini chose to engage in battle with this specific paper, a specialist publication for sports coverage, is unclear. However, by 1926 he was being threatened with bankruptcy, and according to *The Times* this was a consequence of the

failed libel action (December 16, 1925; June 11 and 30, 1926). It has also been suggested that there were increasing divisions between the gangs and that the Sabinis were no longer able to maintain their dominance of the racecourses.⁴² Hence, with the removal of the notorious Italian gang leader from the metropolis, the press might simply have lost interest. Moreover, by the later twenties the Jockey Club had engaged inspectors to supervise the racecourses, and the Bookmakers Association had formed Pitch Committees to protect the rights of legitimate bookmakers, in a more concerted attempt to stymie racecourse criminality.⁴³

Despite Sabini's relocation and the decline of press interest in race-gang related violence, it is likely that there were continuities in gang activity involving networks from the East London, Clerkenwell and Elephant and Castle areas.⁴⁴ However, it would not be until a decade later that racecourse related violence would again be headline news. In 1936 events had escalated during the early summer with the reporting of arrests at Lewes racecourse. Reports over the course of June clarified the series of events (*The Times*, June 10, 1936; *Empire News*, June 14 and 21, 1936). A large group of men had descended upon Lewes races armed with "various weapons, including hatchets, hammers, bars of iron, and a knuckle-duster" (*The Times*, July 29, 1936). A fight had ensued during which two bookmakers from East London, Mark Frater and his employer Alfred Solomon, had been assaulted. The sixteen accused men were charged with malicious wounding and riot at the Sussex Assizes.⁴⁵ According to a report in the *News of the World* from 21 June Chief-Inspectors Sharpe and Duncan were preparing for "battle" in the face of a new outbreak of race-gang feuds. This report suggests a re-emergence of the gangs and some new formation. Whilst there is no reference to the events at Lewes, information received

from Scotland Yard had warned that the bookmakers and their assistants “are to be ‘beaten up’ shortly if they do not ‘pay out’” (an editorial note helpfully explained this “gangster vernacular”) (*News of the World*, June 21, 1936). The Lewes events were a gift to the press, which could highlight the role of the Flying Squad and depict the figure of “Nutty” Sharpe bearing down on the gangs like an English Eliot Ness; as the *Daily Mirror* noted, “Chief Inspector Sharpe, of the Yard, said to know every race-gang crook by sight...” (July 31, 1936). The *Empire News* also relied heavily on the police version of events, and dramatically drew on direct police and witness testimony to colour in the “gangsters” language, describing the confrontation in detail, “When Spinks shouted. ‘Get your tools ready,’ every member of the gang produced a weapon. Spinks was flourishing a hatchet over his head, and said, ‘Come on, boys’” (June 14 and 21, 1936). The *Daily Mirror*, by this time the leading mass-market tabloid, would adopt the gangster trope in its reporting of the trial held at the Sussex Assizes in late July, opening its report on the summing up by Justice Hilbery with a “Warning to the gangsters of England who live by terror and intimidation on racecourses that they will meet with no mercy” (July 30, 1936). What might be termed the “hard-boiled” terminology used by the press was one shared by the first generation of retiring CID detectives, many of whom published memoirs in this period. Indeed, the relationship between press and police was crucial to the selection and presentation of crime news. As Haia Shpayer Makov has noted of the Edwardian period, “The information they possessed, and the reliance on the reporters on their goodwill, endowed them with a great deal of power in choosing what to release to the press”.⁴⁶

By 1936 the “gangster” had become a formidable cultural icon and thus recognisable to the British public as a “type”. Increasingly an awareness had emerged of Britain’s home-grown brand of gangsterism. As the *Daily Express* reflected in 1934, the racecourse gangs were nearly as “ruthless as the racketeers in Chicago”.⁴⁷ Indeed, as a writer in the *Times* had noted in 1932, “The end of the War, the film, the motor has created another class of criminal and convict...The typical “gangster” is able-bodied and intelligent, vicious beyond reclamation, and contemptuous of society whilst determined to live at its expense. He knows the use of a car and a gun, will take most risks, and does not shun violence” (February 8, 1932). The reference to film was timely. The rising influence of the American gangster film by this period, particularly with the release of *Little Caesar*, *Scarface* and *The Public Enemy* in 1931 and 1932, meant that the language of gangsterdom had become embedded in British cultural forms.⁴⁸ As Davies has noted, in Glasgow, the influence of the gangster film was particularly remarked upon, “According to the *Mail*, such films provided explicit instruction in the arts of ‘gangsterdom’”.⁴⁹ It is hardly surprising that the filmic quality of the violence, already noted in the earlier reports of race-gang affrays, would by 1936, would be remarked upon. Thus the *Daily Mirror* described the events at Lewes as “An extraordinary story – rivalling a gangster film scene” (July 28, 1936). Indeed, the dramatic qualities of the Lewes events would provide a direct influence for Graham Greene’s influential novel *Brighton Rock*, published in 1938. A former member of the Sabini gang apparently acted as an advisor to the film-makers John and Roy Boulting, who produced and directed the film version of 1947.⁵⁰ In an ironic twist of fate, the victim of the final racecourse-related event to be widely reported by the press, the Wandsworth Greyhound Track Affray,

would have a connection to the gangster of popular culture, albeit in its British form. Bert Marsh and Herbert Wilkins, both of Clerkenwell, had been accused of the murder and attempted murder of two brothers, Massimino Monte-Colombo and Camillo Monte-Colombo at Wandsworth on the 1 September 1936. The affray had arisen from an argument between the accused and the brothers, and Massiminio Monte-Colombo would die of his injuries shortly afterwards. The *Daily Mirror* was quick to point out that Monte-Colombo had been an extra in the newly released film, *Educated Evans*, a horse-racing film involving racing “crooks”, based on the novels of that most prolific of British crime writers, Edgar Wallace (September 4, 1936).⁵¹

Conclusion

After 1936 the racecourse wars effectively disappeared from the British press. Whilst other families and networks may have succeeded the Sabinis, for the most part the violent confrontations on metropolitan streets and provincial racecourses were consigned to the past.⁵² The events at Lewes were presented retrospectively by Sharpe and Greeno as a “last hurrah” of the racing gangs, with both men claiming that the racecourse gangs were effectively finished after these men had been tried.⁵³ As Greeno stated in his memoirs from 1960, written in the hard-boiled style, “That was the end of all resistance. The Hoxton mob had come to show who ruled the racecourse and now they know who did – the police”.⁵⁴ Moreover, new police technology and innovation at least in part helped to stymie the racecourse gangs. Thus the mobility of the racing-men, and their willingness to take their affrays outside the contained spaces of the racecourse, had increasingly brought them to the attention of the Flying Squad.⁵⁵ As “Nuttie” Sharpe noted in 1938, “The Flying Squad played a very big part in breaking up these mobs of thugs. As the

motor organization at our disposal improved, and wireless was brought more into play, we were often able to round up mobs of these hooligans very soon after an attack”.⁵⁶

This article has focussed on the development of press reporting about forms of British organised crime in the interwar period. Arguably, whilst modern paradigms of organised crime would not emerge until the later twentieth century, in the early 1920s concern about gang crime was shaped by a tendency to see groups of criminals getting more organised, more mobile, and more violent. The focus here has been narrowly on the press reportage of racecourse-related crime, which between 1920 and 1925 reflected circulating fears about alien criminality, terrorism, and armed criminals. When such forms of “terrorism” invaded the streets and transport hubs of the metropolis, these internecine, territorial conflicts came to represent a clear danger and threat to the public, resulting in dramatic and often graphic press coverage. From the later 1920s, the influence of American gangsterism would further shape the reporting of British gang-related crime. Indeed, the contemporary juxtaposition between press reporting and cultural production may have extended the rhetorical reach of the gangster. For instance, in Glasgow the growing influence of gangster rhetoric in the press reporting of crime began a couple of years after the escalation of sectarian gang fighting in the city; thus from 1930 the label of gangster and comparisons with Chicago were increasingly invoked in the Glasgow context.⁵⁷ However, the influence of the American gangster was felt beyond Glasgow, and renewed press reporting of events on the racecourse in 1936 would also echo this new cultural script, demonstrating the emerging influence of the gangster trope as a way of explaining British gang crime. As “former crook” Mark Benney would note in a series of articles written for the *Daily Mirror* in 1937, “He surveys violent

crimes of all types and foreshadows the gradual spread of American gangster methods throughout this country” (January 26, 1937). Indeed, from the thirties as Mark Roodhouse has shown, criminals were quick to adopt the language and mannerisms of gangsterdom, influenced no doubt by the screen depictions of such as Cagney and Muni.⁵⁸ Ultimately these sporadic outbreaks of racecourse violence must be understood in the context of the development of long-term traditions of crime organisation in Britain. Yet, they were reported by a press who were deeply informed by an idea of crime that was something alien, “modern” and, to some extent, externally influenced. Arguably, the presence of the Anglo-Italian Sabini family was crucial to the tone of this coverage. Moreover, their predominance of the press reports reflects the significance of the Sabinis and their networks to the development of urban crime formations. Thus Billy Hill, self-styled “Boss of Britain’s Underworld” during the forties and fifties, placed himself firmly within a tradition that embraced the racecourse gangs, and the Sabinis in particular. His memoir, written in 1955, reframed the Sabinis as a Mafiosi mob, ruling the metropolitan underworld of the roaring twenties. As he noted, “They had London in the palms of their hands”.⁵⁹

¹ Wensley, *Scotland Yard*, 100.

² Morton, *Gangland*; McDonald, *Gangs*.

³ Hobbs, *Bad Business*, 115; Wright, *Organised Crime*, 167.

⁴ Jenkins and Potter, “Before the Krays,” 221.

⁵ Williams, *Read All About It!*, 125-50.

⁶ Bingham, *Family Newspapers?*, 17.

⁷ Bland, *Modern Women*, 8.

⁸ Williams, *Read All About It!*, 182.

⁹ Bland, *Modern Women*, 8, 9.

¹⁰ Bingham, *Family Newspapers?*, 162.

¹¹ Wood, "Third Degree," 464-85.

¹² Jewkes, *Media & Crime*, 45-60.

¹³ Jewkes, *Media & Crime*, 54-5.

¹⁴ Davies, "Scottish Chicago?," 524.

¹⁵ Emsley, *Crime and Society*, 86.

¹⁶ Brown, "Crime, Criminal Mobilty," 563.

¹⁷ Emsley, *Crime and Society*, 87.

¹⁸ Leach, *On Top of the Underworld*, 3.

¹⁹ Teignmouth Shore, *Crime and Its Detection*, 239, for contemporary commentary on the motor-car and crime.

²⁰ Shore, "Criminality and Englishness in the Aftermath."

²¹ Bourke, *Working Class Cultures*, 198.

²² Cramer, "Fear and Loathing in Whitehall."

²³ The National Archives (hereafter TNA): HO 45/23691, 'Octavius Sabini, Internment'.

²⁴ Davies, "Scottish Chicago?," 513.

²⁵ Emsley, *Crime and Society*, 117.

²⁶ Southwell, *History of Organised Crime*, 118.

²⁷ For the police court records of these events see the registers for Clerkenwell and

Marylebone Magistrates Court at the London Metropolitan Archive: LMA:

PS/CLE/A1/60, 61, 62, 63; PS/MAR/A1/70, 71.

²⁸ Shore, "Criminality and Englishness in the Aftermath."; Kent, *Aftershocks*.

²⁹ Reference to the Mafia blood feud and vendetta can be found increasingly from the later nineteenth century, for example see *The Times*, 8 April 1891: 13.

³⁰ TNA: HO 144/10430, 'CID Report, 1 December 1922'; 'Minutes, H.O., August 1925'.

³¹ Bean, *Sheffield Gang Wars*, 24-5.

³² Bean, *Sheffield Gang Wars*, 24-5.

³³ Bean, *Sheffield Gang Wars*, 25.

³⁴ Brown, "Crime, Criminal Mobility," 561.

³⁵ Huggins, *Horseracing*, 126-7.

³⁶ See also the police reports: TNA: MEPO 3/346.

³⁷ In his statement to the police relating to the Gray's Inn Road shooting, Alf White remarked that he and 'Darby' Sabini had, 'returned from Goodwood Races by Motor-car', TNA: MEPO 3/1579.

³⁸ In reference to these events, 'Nuttty' Sharpe noted, 'Cars were often used for raids on rival gangsters' headquarters'. Sharpe, *Flying Squad*, 206.

³⁹ Bean, *Sheffield Gang Wars*, 125.

⁴⁰ Roodhouse, "In Racket Town," 525.

⁴¹ Davies, "Scottish Chicago?," 511-27.

⁴² Murphy, *Smash and Grab*, 33.

⁴³ Chinn, *Better Betting*, 182.

⁴⁴ For example, TNA: HO 144/10430 covers the activities of racecourse ruffians and the Sabini gang until 1929. TNA: MEPO 3/374 covers the murder of Barnet Blitz by Alfred

Solomon and its aftermath from 1924 to 1931. TNA: MEPO 3/910 covers a charge of GBH by Alfred White and William White in 1935.

⁴⁵ Shore, "Criminality and Englishness in the Aftermath," 18-19.

⁴⁶ Shpayer-Makov, *Ascent of the Detective*, 223.

⁴⁷ Chinn, *Better Betting*, 181-84.

⁴⁸ Springhall, "Censoring Hollywood."

⁴⁹ Davies, "Scottish Chicago?," 518.

⁵⁰ Chibnall, *Brighton Rock*, 30.

⁵¹ Wallace would be the most filmed author of the decade, and is particularly associated with the gangster film. Richards, *Dream Palace*, 114.

⁵² Murphy, *Smash and Grab*, 156-62.

⁵³ Sharpe, *Flying Squad*, 211.

⁵⁴ Greeno, *War on the Underworld*, 66.

⁵⁵ Formed by Fred Wensley in 1919 as the Mobile Patrol Experiment, the adoption of the Crossley Tender patrol car from 1920 would increasingly be used to combat the racecourse gangs.

⁵⁶ Sharpe, *Flying Squad*, 207; Kirby, *The Sweeney*. TNA: MEPO 13/4 and MEPO5/128 provide information on police wireless and telegraphy systems. For an account of the use of patrol cars in the early days of the Flying Squad, Frost, *Flying Squad*, 11-42.

⁵⁷ Davies, "Scottish Chicago?."

⁵⁸ Roodhouse, "In Racket Town," 524-7.

⁵⁹ Hill, *Boss of Britain's Underworld*, 4.

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